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Amid Calls to Replace Columbus Day, Author Says Explorer Misunderstood

Scholar discusses Columbus' religious motivation as students urge changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day



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BRISTOL, R.I. – Brown University research scholar Carol Delaney came to Roger Williams University on Nov. 30 to speak about her book, "Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem: How Religion Drove the Voyages that Led to America."

Delaney's speech took place as a group of RWU students has been calling for the university to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. About 75 students lined up outside the University Library before the event and packed the Mary Tefft White room during her speech, peacefully protesting while holding signs, petitions and letters. "They're not listening to our voice," sophomore Brianna Messa said before the lecture.

The event, which concluded with a question-and-answer session, underscored widespread agreement on the need for an Indigenous Peoples Day but sharp disagreement about Columbus' legacy and whether Columbus Day should be replaced at RWU.

"I just want to congratulate us all for having a very difficult conversation, in the sense of it being a very difficult topic, and doing it in a very civil fashion," RWU President Donald J. Farish said afterward. "I think we are showing America how you take up these questions. We are not done. There is more to come."

Delaney, an emerita professor at Stanford University who was assistant director of Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions, began her talk by saying she favors an Indigenous Peoples Day. "As an anthropologist, I think we have to do a lot more," she said. "I'd like to see the whole country devote the next few years learning about the more than 300 Native groups who are living in our midst."

But, Delaney said, "People also need to learn more about Columbus because he is not the man that most people think he is. So I support an Indigenous Peoples Day – but not as a replacement for Columbus Day."

Most people know very little about Columbus, Delaney said. "Very few have read his diary, his letters and his memos. Before I began my research, I, too, knew hardly anything about him except 'In 1492 he sailed the ocean blue.' "

Born in 1451 in Genoa, Italy, Columbus was part of a Catholic society that believed Jerusalem needed to be in Christian hands so Christ could return and believers could be raptured up to heaven, and Columbus believed he had an important role to play in that apocalyptic drama, she said. Thinking he was headed for Asia, he hoped to convince the Grand Khan, who'd expressed an interest in Christianity, to launch a crusade from the East while Europeans would come from the West to take Jerusalem.

"The purpose of the voyage was to set up trading posts to obtain gold and spices that would finance the crusade. There was absolutely no intention of killing or enslaving people belonging to the greatest empire in the world," Delaney said. "Columbus was confident and began to think of himself as the Christ bearer – like his namesake, St. Christopher – carrying the Christian religion across the waters."

In 1492, Columbus reached the Bahamas, believing it was East Asia, and recorded that date as Oct. 12, using the Julian calendar, but it would be Oct. 22 under today's Gregorian calendar, she said. "So one suggestion is that maybe Indigenous Peoples Day should be Oct. 22."

Delaney said, "Columbus' impulse toward the Native people was one of benevolence and friendship, motivated by a concern for their conversion." He became friends with a chieftain named Guacanagari, and she said, "As far as we know, Columbus never killed a native, took a native woman or had a slave."

But Columbus was annoyed that sailors were "rapacious" when they went ashore, and Spanish leaders such as Francisco de Bobadilla and Nicolas de Ovando did do terrible things to the indigenous people, she said.

During a question-and-answer session, a student asked if Delaney knew about the states, cities and other universities that celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day instead of Columbus Day – including the school where she works, Brown University.

Delaney reiterated that she supports Indigenous Peoples Day but not as a replacement for Columbus Day. “If it were Bobodilla or Ovando Day, yes, I would say immediately; they were the ones who did horrible things.” But, she said, “The only people Columbus killed were two Spaniards who had done bad things.”

Another student cited Boston University Professor Howard Zinn’s book, which says Columbus wrote in his log that the indigenous people “do not bear arms ... They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane. They would make fine servants. With 50 men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

Zinn also quoted Columbus as writing: “As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first island which I found, I took some of the natives by force in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts.”

“I have looked at Zinn’s book,” Delaney replied. “I thought it was terrible.” She said Columbus “did talk about the weapons that they had were not very good compared to the kinds that the Christians had, but that was not to subjugate and take them.”

Another student asked if Delaney agreed that Columbus stands as a symbol of the North American colonization that resulted in the destruction of the culture and took many of the lives of indigenous people.

Delaney said, “Do you think this continent, this country, would have remained only for the Native Americans? Somebody is going to come here – somebody at some point – whether it’s Columbus or somebody else.”

The student said that doesn’t excuse the actions that followed. Delaney said, “Good intentions can have terrible results.”

RWU history Professor Charlotte Carrington-Farmer noted that RWU is “named for a man who violently opposes converting indigenous people.” Roger Williams, Rhode Island’s founder, declared that forced worship “stinks in God’s nostrils.” So, she asked, “How can we celebrate Columbus, if your point is about religious conversion, when our namesake is strongly against that?”

A student asked, “Should we actually be investing all this time and energy celebrating him when he never set foot on this soil?” Delaney said Amerigo Vespucci never set foot on U.S. soil, either, but America derives its name from him.

Another student asked what purpose Columbus Day serves if his goal was to fund the conquest of Jerusalem. Delaney said, “He is the first person that crossed the ocean that nobody thought could be crossed, and it was a very courageous thing to have done.”

The student cited earlier journeys by Nordic people. Delaney said, "They did not cross across the wide ocean. They went up around Greenland and Iceland, maybe to Newfoundland, we don't know. I think it's quite an extraordinary feat."

A student questioned why the Nov. 30 event wasn't structured as a debate, presenting scholars representing both sides of a controversial topic. "We were told that you only agreed to a lecture-style event," the student said. "What are your thoughts about critical-thinking dialogues and why do we not have such an event tonight?"

Delaney said she didn't think a debate format would allow her to make the points she wanted to make about Columbus. "I think that there are things in the lecture and in my book that you've never heard about," but "I would be happy to come back and have another kind of a debate, if that is what you would like," she said.

As the event came to a close, RWU Trustee Mario J. Gabelli thanked Delaney and said he was proud of the RWU students. The world has seen "less civility in dialogue over the last several years," but "we have the right dialogue here tonight," he said. He offered a free copy of Delaney's book to anyone who wants one and said, "If you have a book that you'd like to share, I will read it, as well."

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